

May 6, 1992

David Wright (UK Ambassador in Seoul) to FCO, 'Los Angeles Riots: Korean Reaction'

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Summary:

While geopolitical reconfigurations in the region and issues like arms control and defense posture were of key concern to British observers, American domestic events also fed into British analysis. This report describes South Korean responses to the attacks on Korean-Americans during the riots in Los Angeles in the summer of 1992

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LOS ANGELES RIOTS: KOREAN REACTION

SUMMARY

1. Koreans seen as bearing brunt of damage during last week's riots in Los Angeles. Risk of escalation into bilateral issue.

DETAIL

2. There has been a very strong public reaction in Korea to last week's rioting in Los Angeles with TV and newspapers devoting considerable coverage to the riots. This coverage has focussed primarily, indeed almost exclusively, on the damage done to Korean businesses as a result of the looting and arson. Some of the press coverage has bordered on the pernicious although for the most part it is merely simplistic: poor innocent Koreans have suffered as a result of an issue which had nothing to do with them.

3. In response to this reaction, the US ambassador was called to the Foreign Ministry on 1 May and given a formal request to his government to provide protection for Koreans in Los Angeles. Opposition leader Kim Dae Jung flew to Los Angeles on Monday to meet the mayor and the Californian governor, and a formal government delegation headed by Assistant Foreign Minister Ho Seung followed yesterday. In the press at least, the government appear to have been lending support to public demands and demands from Koreans in LA for compensation, and also appear to have supported accusations of negligence through failure to provide adequate protection for Korean businesses. The press have in turn reported US criticisms that this amounts to interference in domestic affairs.

4. The US Embassy here are anxious to play down the whole affair. Their view is that provided peace is now maintained in Los Angeles so that reconstruction work can get well under way, the issue will quickly die away, although the question of negligence will give Californian lawyers work for months if not years to come. While the Korean government has set up a task force to pursue the matter, the Foreign Ministry has told the US Embassy that its role will be limited to acting as a clearing house to channel private assistance to the Korean community in LA and there will be no Korean government support. Hendrickson, Political Counselor US Embassy, told us that the US could live with this approach, although some of his colleagues were less relaxed about the reactions of the Korean government.

COMMENT

5. The strong public reaction here is typical. Behind it all lies the peculiar sense of Korean-ness which identifies Korean communities overseas whether or not they are native Koreans, coupled with the traditional Korean sense of grievance. Once again, Koreans are the persecuted underdog. On the other hand, and unusually, the Koreans in LA have also been criticised both for their unwillingness to mix more with the community at large and for their determination always to drive hard business deals, factors which are thought to have helped alienate other sectors of the American community. Nevertheless, in public eyes, the issue has already been added to the long list of misdeeds committed by the rest of the world by the long-suffering Korean race. This helps explain the muted US Embassy response. They are anxious not to say or do anything which will further inflame Korean passions, particularly with student demonstration season about to start.

Wright

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